

Mary Miele: Hello. My name is Mary Miele. I am a tutor, a teacher, a parent, and the founder of Evolved Education company. We are a full-service tutoring and advisement company for all of your educational solutions.

On this podcast, we'll explore ideas, techniques, and resources that you can use to support your school-age child to conquer any learning issue. I'm so glad you're here.

Hello and welcome to February's episode of Evolved Education podcast. I am honored to have two of my favorite people here to talk with us today about special education. Mark and Amy Alter have been in my life since the 1990s, when I was studying special education and swimming over at NYU.

I'm so excited to have them here to talk about this very near and dear topic to my heart. I know it's theirs as well, so I'm going to let them go ahead and introduce themselves to our audience. Who wants to go first?

Amy Alter: I'll go first.

Mary Miele: Okay. Amy, go ahead.

Amy Alter: Hi. I have been in the field of education for over 30 years. I started with the New York City DOE as a resource room teacher. Or a SETTS teacher, as it's now called.

I directed the art program at Camp Riverdale in the Bronx, and I've been supervising student teachers for the past eight years at NYU and now I'm at UCB University. I do a lot of artwork at home too.

Mary Miele: Wonderful. Thank you. All right, Mark. You're up.

Mark Alter: I'm older. I started with the Association for the Help of Retarded Children in 1970 as an assistant teacher. My whole background is working with kids with very severe and profound disabilities.

I grew up in the New York City school system and never saw a kid with a disability. I grew up in the era where there was tremendous segregation and isolation and institutionalization. I went from HRC to a research center in mental retardation as a researcher, and then went on to do more studies in 1980 at NYU.

The commitment is to prepare teachers, who are the key. Teachers are the key to what's going to happen with children with disabilities, as well as children without disabilities. And the key role that parents play in the education of their children in a very difficult system.

Mary Miele: For sure.

Mark Alter: Across the country. It's not just unique to New York, but the issues are pervasive across the country, if not across the globe.

Mary Miele: A hundred percent. And I met you in my early years of my career, learning how to become a special education teacher. I remember your passion of the

fields was absolutely contagious and really spearheaded a career of mine.

I also remember you teaching us about IDEA and how you were ... It was very important to you, it seemed, to teach us that it was so new. And that it really was something that transforms the opportunities that students had.

I wanted to talk today just a little bit about our audience, which is really parents who are trying very hard to help our children to learn as well as possible. I wanted to just gather some of your wisdom. Especially, that perspective, which I think is important for parents to really understand and appreciate that the field is quite young.

Many times parents are the entrepreneurs. They're the inventors of what to do with their children. And I think that's so absolutely wonderful to think about, because we are really endeavoring so many new things in the field as it goes along. Because it is so new.

I wanted just to ask each of you ... What do you feel is one or some of the more profound areas of progress that you feel the field has made since 1976? Which consequently is the year of my birth, which is fun. How amazing.

I think God had some thoughts in the matter. But I was wondering if you had any thoughts about something very special that you think has come about? Just to be inspiring to parents who perhaps are thinking about their own children with special needs.

Mark Alter: I'll just give a quick start. I think a little bit of a historical background is critical. And I'm certainly going to make it very short. Prior to the law, the Education for All Handicapped Children ... Children were excluded from public school.

Many of the private agencies in this country, such as The Association for Retarded Citizens, Young Adult Institute, Catholic Charities, United Cerebral Palsy were all started by parents. Because parents and their children were being denied access to the public schools.

The way public schools were built, they were not physically accessible, let alone giving kids the opportunity to learn. It's important to keep in mind that this is despite research that showed all kids can learn. Systems kept kids out of school.

Along comes 1975. A law is passed called Education for All Handicapped Children. While you were being born, I was a doctoral student and we were very excited. Because my professor was one of the court masters in a major case and we were right on top of it.

The law was very simple. And I think this is very key to what you do, Mary. The law said that no child, regardless of type of disability or degree of disability, can be denied access to public education. Fascinating. Powerful. It also built in ... That was called Zero Reject. No child from birth to age 21 can be denied access to a free, appropriate public education.

The law did not define what is appropriate or what is least-restricted. That's where it gets a little sticky. But it also built into seven major principles. But the one that's really critical for parents is that the parents are equal partners.

That when they go to a meeting called an individual education meeting, an IEP meeting ... If they don't sign, they don't have to agree with what a system says is most important for the kid. It's supposed to be a discussion. It's supposed to be negotiation.

Parents must have a voice. And that's not just mom. It could be mom and dad. It could be siblings. But the parents are equal partners according to Federal law. Starting ... Amy's lens on this as a teacher is much better than mine.

Mine is from a research perspective and looking at the data that there's a lot of concern. The takeaway is that we haven't done as well with kids as we thought we would do. Despite the law. That parents still, after all these years, play a critical role in the education of their child.

When a child goes from grade to grade and school to school ... The one constant. The one constant is the family. The role of parent, no matter what lens you use, is critical to ensure that there is consistency. That there is coherency and that their child receives an appropriate education.

Mary Miele: What would you say to that, Amy?

Amy Alter: I totally agree. My perspective is as a teacher. When I started out in 1984, the IEP was in place. It was not enforced as well as it should be, or as it is today. It was there. Parents signed it. I don't think they understood it. I don't think they realized the power they had. That it was a legal document.

As teachers ... I was in an interesting school. It was in a great area. We were in the Bronx. At any given time of the 1,600 children in the building, 800 of them were recent immigrants. We went through many waves of immigration. We had parents that didn't speak English, were learning English. Did not know the laws. Didn't even realize that their children weren't reading.

It was interesting. As a teacher in the building, our administration used to say to us, "We can't give you any curriculum, any materials. You can go look in the old book closet and pull out what you could find." The commitment to educating these children that needed a little bit more was not as effective as it should have been.

We were a group of dedicated teachers that really wanted to help the kids. We found ways. We made our own materials. That was 1984. Now, it's evolved. It's much different. The children are part of the class. They're entitled to all of the same materials that children in general ... A lot of the children are in general ed with the ICT classes. You have a percentage of general ed students, a percentage of children with IEPs.

They're all entitled to the same education with differentiated learning now, which we probably always did back then, but it didn't have a name to it. Parents are included and welcomed to participate, to help. Questions are always welcomed by every teacher. Whatever a parent needs to know. There are advocacy groups for parents, which are much more accessible now than they were back then.

A whole legal system is open to a parent. As Mark said before, if the parent does not agree with the IEP team at the school level, they do not have to sign the IEP. They can

take it to the next level. There are several levels they could go through to get what they feel is important for their child. Parents know their children better than any teacher.

Now, we want to listen to the parents. We want to hear what they have to say. We want to know what difficulties they're having, as well as what makes your child shine. What is he interested in? What is he like? What is he ... One of the areas on the IEP is to ask the child what is his preferred mode of learning, which I found very interesting when we first saw that.

We used to interview the kids. I don't know if any other school did that, but we did that. The kids would say, "I want to sit in the back of the room. I want to sit in the front of the room. I like when the teacher comes and bends down near my desk and talks to me privately. I like when the teacher calls me up to the front of the room and I could ask all my questions."

It's interesting. All the children have different ideas of learning. They're interested. I've never met a child that did not want to learn. Ever.

Mary Miele: Me either.

Amy Alter: That's what makes it so exciting. I've never met a parent that did not want the best for their child. That's also very exciting. And I've met many parents with many difficulties.

Trying to negotiate the system, their life, their everything. And the center of their attention is their child. You can't ask for better than that as a teacher.

Mary Miele: Never. So true. So true. I would also say, I feel it's very exciting for our fields. Because I remember ... When I was beginning, I was in a MIS1 class, which was a self-contained class for students.

Like you, Amy, I was also directed to the closet to locate a couple of materials for them. I had to be very creative. Thank goodness ... Actually, NYU at the time had four semesters of student teaching that I could pull upon. I called everyone I knew to help me with that particular endeavor.

But I really would say something very special that I've seen happen is the clarity that we have built around some of the issues that students have with their learning. It's so wonderful to know that if you have a diagnosis, that there is actually an evidence-based plan of action that you can take to help a child to learn.

They feel so good when they know how to go about that learning. A parent can feel so good when they understand their child's neurology, and then also know there's a method for this. We can figure this out. Your child has all of these amazing gifts inside of them that are just going to explode, because we have done the work to learn how these kids learn.

That's been really fun for me to watch happen from my days in the MIS1, where I felt like everyone was placed in the same category. You were a student with the disability. Now, I feel like we're perhaps differentiating that just a little bit. Being a little more precise with offering the support, which I find is very empowering. I have a few more

questions. I know. I feel like we could get into that one for a long time.

Mark Alter: Mary, could I just ...

Mary Miele: Oh, please. Of course. Yes. Please.

Mark Alter: Could I just build on something?

Mary Miele: Yes.

Mark Alter: I'm so proud of you. Such a good student. You've learned so much. And it's a message, I think, for parents. You said it very nicely. It's very important for the parents not to get caught up in a label. It's important that they get caught up in their child and the learning characteristics.

Amy is 100% right to interview the child. The law is very clear, Federal law, that the child can be at the IEP meeting. If you want to know what a kid likes, you ask the kid. But what's happened ... And it's a historical phenomena. I just wrote something about it today, actually.

When I was in school, there was a category called, "Mental Retardation," and it was the hot topic. Then, it went to learning disabilities. And then, it went to Attention Deficit Disorder. Now, the category that's getting most of the publicity is autism. It's important to keep in mind that approximately over 70% of the children in New York State and in the country are speech and language impaired and have a learning disability.

Maybe 10% of that high have been labeled as autistic. When the law was passed in the year you mentioned, '75, there were only 11 disability categories. Autism was not one of the categories. Autism became a category, I believe, in 1987. As soon as we built it, all of a sudden it got filled. It was this social definition.

And I think that when parents approach this, when they approach the system, that IEP is blank. They're approaching the system knowing their child, knowing what they feel they want for their child, but not a label. They make decisions regarding content, make decisions regarding placement, based on the needs of their child. You handled it beautifully.

If a kid is labeled learning disabled or autistic, whatever the label ... There is a body of research that we should look at. The professional should look at it, but not make the ultimate decision that that's all there is. They need to look at creativity, curiosity, play. Or sharing. Waiting your turn.

All the grit. All these wonderful human characteristics that make us who we are. It's not the label that should drive the decision making, but the needs of their child. That generation from which Amy comes out of, and you as well, it's a kid-centered model. Not a label. Not a categorical, centered type of model.

Mary Miele: Thank you for that. Thank you for that. I think it's so true that we can get very fixated on the labels. Because it can feel very helpful, when we're in some trauma or despair with our children, to assign something to it that is a pathway maybe out of that. But I think what I have learned, and what I try to teach the parents that I work with is ...

That is really just one way of looking at this situation.

Your child has been given to you with this, "Condition," let's just say. The way it presents for your child is going to be unique. It's not going to be the same way as somebody else's child. More over, let's be honest. The gifts that these kids give us, every one of them ... Who cares if they have one of these labels or not?

That's what we should all be really talking about in a great deal of chatter. And it's very wonderful. Because I remember also going through some of my own parenting with my children ... I remember, Amy, you and I were having a conversation. I was in tears over a diagnosis that one of my children was given.

You just told me something. I will never forget. I don't know if you remember saying this to me. But you're like, "Mary, your child is your child. Your child is the most beautiful, absolutely stunning, perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect human that you brought into this world. Nothing is going to change that. Go back to that place, please."

And it really made me pause. I remember thinking, "You know what? Yeah." My child has a lot of labels. We could just go through all the list. I probably have all the experience with this. But it made me think about him in that ... I always said, "You know what? I'm not going to think of him that way. You're right."

Thank you for that permission granted. I'm going to think about him as I know him. He's my son. And it allowed me to have balance within the education that I was seeking for him. Now, when I practice my work with our families ... They'll come to me and they'll say, "If my child just got this neuropsych ..."

We have a diagnosis of, let's say, autism. "What do I do? What's the best school for that?" And I say, "Well, it doesn't really work that way." We have to find what you want and what is the resources that you have. There's a million different ways to educate your child, actually.

Let's just figure out what's going to work here for you and feel good for you at the end of the day. And that you're going to feel like, "This is exactly what I want my child doing." There's not one way we all have to go about doing this. That's the beauty of education. Right?

I think that's such a good message for parents to hear. Because I remember also, Mark ... In class, there was something else you taught me that really stuck with me, which was when parents get the news. I remember you were very dramatic when you were telling the story. I don't know if you remember this.

But you were like, "When they get the news that there's something wrong with their kid. They go through the grieving process and you as a teacher need to be aware of that." They may be in this status of being angry or being sad or being avoidant maybe of the issues that their children have. Or maybe they're just in any of those stages, really. I remember that. Do you remember that?

Mark Alter: I don't remember.

Mary Miele: Come on. Go back. All the classes you've taught. No, I'm kidding,

Mark Alter: Mary, I remember you. It's such a complex topic. Because it's a family. It's not just a mom's responsibility. There are siblings. There's a dad. Everyone has wishes and everyone has dreams. The minute you get that label from somebody ... It's usually from a pediatrician, who may not have been prepared to interpret what that means.

But they've been conditioned to look at a label that ... Usually, the parent has no one that helps them, takes them through the process of understanding what that means. You opened up a very important message to parents. Really critical. Because I'm thinking, when you asked us that first question to the parents.

Children grow up and they need to think of the future. They need to think of independence. Colleges. If a child, as a young adult, wants to go to college ... Parents need to know that at age 15, but as early as 14, there's something called transition plans, which is part of the Federal law and the IEP. Where they sit down and they plan for their transition from school to the world of independence.

If parents ... The fancy term is infantilization. You have a child and you always look at the lens. Parents need to plan for the future. Teachers are great, because teachers have an understanding of what are the skills that will be needed to be developed over time to prepare for that independence.

We closed the institutions. We closed Willowbrook. We closed those terrible, horrible human storage closets. People are living in communities, in apartments. Supervised apartments. Some really great stuff going on, but we need to prepare for independence. We need to prepare for a quality of life. And it's hard sometimes for parents to see into the future.

It's the teacher who plays a critical role in helping parents see the future. How do you prepare early childhood and childhood and middle school? The parent has to keep on pushing for the future. And it's tough. And I think teachers are a wonderful resource that help mediate making decisions that will be in the best interest of their child.

Not the label, but it's their child who will grow up to be a young adult. Who will be able to prosper and go into competitive employment and do so many things. Provided they're given the educational skills that will allow them to function. The law has been great. It's opened the door.

That's all. It's opened the door. Could we have done better? Without a question. Without a question. We should have done better. We could have done better. This is not the type of discussion where you want data and figures, but 20% of the kids in the city of New York have IEPs. 20%. About 256,000 children in the city of New York with IEPs.

Those numbers ... I think there are a lot of kids who probably don't need special ed, who have IEPs. Parents have to be careful. Special ed is not always the answer. I think good tutoring, good support services, good systems to support schools are critical. Not every kid who is in special ed should be in special ed.

Mary Miele: That's true. That's true. It's not always the answer. That's very true. I think also that's very true in that parents also need to be critical and own their own intuition. Because sometimes I do speak to parents, and they feel they have an insight.

They feel they have something inside of them.

And as you spoke about, Amy, we really do know our children. Sometimes we get a little confused, because of all of the noise and also perhaps even chatting with other parents. We get distracted.

Amy Alter: It's intimidating for parents to meet ... When a parent comes now to an IEP meeting, there could be up to 10 people in the room. The parent has to give permission for all these people to come, but it's very intimidating. The parent usually will feel ... They'll defer to the so-called experts in the room.

Everybody has their lens. The psychologist might be there. The speech therapist might be there. The occupational therapist, the special ed teacher, the general ed teacher, the guidance counselor ... Whatever could be there. And the parent has the right to bring with them anybody they want, which I don't know if every parent knows that.

When you first enter the IEP world, you're given a booklet on legal rights of a parent. And it's intimidating to read. It's confusing. But I used to go through it with the parent with a highlighter and highlight the sections and say, "Please come back if you don't understand." I don't know if they do that anymore.

But there are a lot of things that a parent needs to know. It's very intimidating and it's hard. That's why the parent really needs to trust their tuition on their child. They know their child the best. I remember very well speaking to Mary. And I remember your face when you go, "Oh." It's hard. Parents love their kids. They're wonderful and they're not going to change.

Because I remember one parent came to our house and sat with us. They were faced with a decision of which many parents might be. To give medication or not. They were devastated. And I said, "It's not going to change your ..." They were afraid that it would really change their child.

I said, "It's not going to change your child." You will still have wonderful little Sam. He'll be fabulous and you'll love him. And if it doesn't work, you'll stop and you'll talk to your doctor about it. But she was terrified that her child, as she knew him, was going to change. They're not. They are going to continue growing and learning, and you're going to find the best way to teach them.

I also was a big advocate for tutoring. The school is a wonderful place, but the extra tutoring after school is what made the difference. It was more comfortable for the child. It got to be more individualized. I'm a big advocate for that. Even if you get a high school senior to come in and help with some math.

A big advocate for that. It's not just the school. And then, all the extra afterschool curricular activities. Swimming and gymnastics or art. Really helps the child develop fully. And then, they'll be more open to learning the academics. It's ...

Mary Miele: I call it school fuel.

Amy Alter: Yep. That's great.

Mary Miele: I say, "What's the school fuel?"

Amy Alter: Great.

Mary Miele: That way they start thinking about that. Because if we place a child within an area that is a challenge, where they're really lifting those weights and really working it out and we ask them to do that all day long ... It's not going to be a happy kiddo. We want to make sure we have that diversity.

You're so right, Mark, though. The kids know exactly what they need. They'll tell you exactly what works. My favorite conversations with my now teenager with all the labels are the ones in which I literally just ask him, "What does that teacher do that makes you understand it?"

He's very clear with me, even with the language problems that he encounters. He can articulate it to me. He knows what really feels good and is clear to him. And I feel that's so special, when you are empowered as a parent to remind yourself to just ask your child. Sometimes we forget that little piece.

We do really look at our kids as little, little bitty beings that need us so much. But a lot of the times, we just need to also be assured to step back and allow them to instruct us as to what that educational journey should be.

Mark Alter: You see, I think, Mary ... Your message is so important. It's so clear. There's more to being a person than just academics. There is this socialization. The major reason why kids as they get older are going to have problems. It's not because of reading and math. It's because of social. When I walk in the street, people are with their phone. I'm down at the campus. They don't look up, but they don't walk into you.

Using your phone in an elevator. Social skills are changing. Kids need the future. The next generation needs to know how to interact with other people. I would say to parents that it's important to remember that an IEP is not a lesson plan. An IEP is a legal document. As Amy said earlier, it's a legal document that memorializes an agreement between the school and the family.

That what's on that document is an appropriate education. But parents should not make the mistake that that's all there is to their kid's education. If they say, "By the end of the year, the kid's going to read at the fourth grade level and do math at the second grade level," there's a lot more.

What about social studies? What about science? What about social skills? What about empathy? Learning how to recognize and react to the emotions of others. For young kids, learning how to play, how to share. How to say, "Excuse me." And I think the role of family and the role of parent becomes critical in reminding the school that it's more than just a label.

It's more than just an academic. But there's a human being sitting here and that we're programming for. I think that the lens that Amy comes at it as a teacher ... The lens that you're coming at it as a parent, but also as a professional, is that there's a lot more to education than reading and writing.

Those are critical. It can't be ignored. But what needs to be mastered is how to get along with other people. What to do. And if you look at 21st century skills, it's problem solving. It's curiosity. It's communication.

These are all behaviors. Socialization. These are all behaviors that may not appear on an IEP. Parents have to be careful. They have to ask the questions. In addition to what you have on the IEP, what else will you be doing?

Mary Miele: Smart. That's very smart. I agree. I so agree. We have just a few more minutes here. I feel as though this is such a valuable conversation for so many parents. I guess, I just wonder ... We've talked about a lot. I'm just going through some of my questions.

But maybe let's just wrap it up as a piece of advice. Something perhaps that we've already mentioned, but maybe you just bringing it to the next level. Or something that we can really make sure that ... Anyone listening today, if you could just walk away with this gift of ours.

As people who've studied this for such a long time, as people who are devoted to your kids. Devoted to your success as a parent. These are a couple of things that I really want for you listening. Whoever wants to go first. I'm putting you right on the spot.

Amy Alter: It's a great question. I will take this question with me after this is over and think about it. I'll come back to you with another answer. But I think if parents look at the process, once they get the diagnosis. Whatever age their child is.

Some children are identified by two, one, depending on what it is ... Or not until they're in kindergarten or first grade, that there's some issue. But to not be afraid and not be devastated by that. To embrace who their child is and know that they have a terrific young individual.

To follow and to get help and to seek help, but not to be afraid of it and ignore it and not pursue avenues of help. Because there is a lot of help nowadays. I've seen a lot of parents who were afraid, and I don't blame them.

It's scary. And if you don't have anybody to talk to, it's scary. So to have the parents seek out help, to ask questions, is the best thing possible. To not be afraid of it and to trust their intuition.

If something does not feel right, if you feel that the school is pushing for your child to go into a certain type of class and you don't feel that's appropriate ... Pursue what you feel is appropriate.

It might in the end turn out that they were right. Okay. And then, at that point, you'll pursue that. But to make everybody happy and feel good about it. But to not deny it, not be afraid of it. It is scary.

Mary Miele: It is. Thank you.

Mark Alter: I'm pretty comfortable with the answer. It's based on 45 years of

experience, the message I would give to parents. They must look at this as a consumer, not as a parent. In addition to what Amy said and you said. I agree 100%. But when they walk into this system, they must be an educated consumer.

The most dangerous parent in the school system is an educated parent. A parent who knows their rights. A parent who knows that they don't have to sign a document. A parent who knows they can ask for a private school setting that will be reimbursed. A parent who is educated will be able to maneuver within the system.

They must look at the handbooks that are translated, at least in New York City, to about 15 different languages. If a parent does not speak English, there needs to be somebody at the IEP meeting who can translate. My message to parents? Be educated. Be a consumer. No one is doing you a favor.

You don't walk into a meeting assuming that it's a favor. There's a responsibility that we as a society have assumed to educate all our children. And it is the responsibility of the school system to provide those services. The parent needs to be part of the decision making process, and they sit with enormous power.

While parents of kids in gen ed don't have to go through these types of processes and discussions and bump ... Because general ed is based on a model of homogeneity. All fourth graders do this. All fifth graders do this.

It's a homogeneous decision making model, which certainly we can have another meeting and I have problems with ... But special ed is based on the needs of an individual. That parent must have a voice. The kid must have a voice. Parents need to be a consumer of the system. That would be my message.

Mary Miele: Brilliant. Brilliant. I just so appreciate this. I think, for me, I would just want parents to know they're not alone. It's very important to me to embrace all parents and really provide them with a big hug. Just know that whether your child has neurodiversity, neurotypical profiles, it's all very hard and important work.

Good for you for having a listen to this. Because part of the journey of being a parent is learning. You get to learn the whole entire time, because you're going to have this individual in your life. They're going to present things to you that you never ever thought was possible.

Hopefully, you just embrace that as a positive. Special education to me provides a very unique experience, in that we get to really delve very deeply into one individual, which is really truly fascinating. And I feel it provides everyone with a next-level opportunity to be amazing and learn and just grow.

That's what I hope parents can understand. And I really wanted to have you all on here today, because you have made such an impact in my career to be able to give that message to parents. I knew you were going to give me some good insight and inspiration, and you really did.

You delivered amazingly as always. A member of my extended family. And I feel very grateful to have you both in my life and my career. I'm going to end the podcast there. We can talk afterwards. Now, I'm so excited. Thank you so much for having this

time with us.

Mark Alter: Mary, thank you very much.

Amy Alter: Thank you.

Mary Miele: Thank you so much for listening to Evolved Education. If you like what you hear, please subscribe and write a review. You can send us any and all educational questions to [hello@evolveded.com](mailto:hello@evolveded.com) and we'll try to address it in our upcoming episodes. That's Evolved Ed. E-V-O-L-V-E-D-E-D dot com.

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